

Water stories from Torres Strait: Dauan and Saibai Islands

by Teena Akiba, Torres Strait Island Regional Council

Let me tell you some water stories about growing up on Dauan Island.

Dauan Island, in the north western island group of Torres Strait, is much known for its rocky hillsides, large boulders and tropical flora and fauna. Throughout the island there are many caves, some of which still remain undiscovered. Some, however, are well-known for their freshwater springs that form wells to supply water for the families.

In total, there are 21 named natural wells on Dauan: Manarr, Dhobani, Dhaniw erad, Woesa-kuik, Dhogai-pudhaisinga, Meri-Mila, Akana-mai, Kupa kuik, Valley, Sazil-mudh, Wasana-pudhayzinga, Kuku, Kaladagam, Sapu, Mari-nguki, Arum-kodh, Awgadhaw-nguki, Kuyaman Klakau Pagayzinga, Maiwan, Gaile, Ama Kuduloena mai. As children we would scour the hills without carrying any water with us because we could always find a drink from a nearby well. We would clear the dead leaves and other material away from the well and wait for the water to settle. Then we would break leaves from nearby trees or use lily pads, shape them into a cone and scoop the water up to quench our thirst; then continue on our barefooted quests.

Some of the wells are filled with water all year round while others may look dry but are surrounded by lush plant growth and are home to many animals. When holes are dug in these dry wells, they fill with water which, when settled, form clear filtered bodies of water.

As a child growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I recollect waking early in the mornings to help our grandparents, uncles or aunts follow the hoses that went for kilometres from the well to the shower shed. The hoses filled 44 gallon drums with water to be used for both household and bathing purposes.

If there was a blockage in the hose, we would have to blow the hose at each joint (copper pipe joints) until the water flowed freely again. When the drums overflowed, we put a stopper or cork which would be removed to refill the drums when they were running low or empty. This was a daily task for many of the children on our island. Living in a house with a very large extended family, this usually took up most of our mornings and afternoons, amongst other household chores, before and after school. Other important chores included cleaning the lamp glasses and filling them with kerosene for our lighting source each night as electricity wasn't available to houses in our community.

We also spent a lot of our weekends doing the laundry. On Saturdays we carried bundles of dirty laundry to one of the wells (Dhobani) where we washed the family's laundry. We put up temporary clothes lines to dry the washing and then came the laborious task of taking the washing off the line, folding it and then carting it home. Whilst we attended to our household chores, other family members tended the family gardens on the northern side of the island at Kumal Kula (translation: hot stone). The gardens would receive seasonal rains throughout the year with different planting and harvesting times for these seasons.





Figure 1 Bamboo water carrier

Historically, water was carted and stored in the internodes of bamboo (figure 1). A hole would be drilled at the node and the cavity filled with water. Palm or fern leaves were inserted as a cork and the bamboo,

sometimes up to two or three meters long, was then balanced on the shoulders to be carried back to their home

Another method included storing water in empty shells of a coconut (kusu), which was handy for long hunting trips out to sea. The inner side of the coconut was left to dry or to be eaten by insects and later washed until clean and used as water holders. Later years saw iron buckets (pails) introduced and made life a little easier, carrying water many kilometres between the wells and homes for drinking and washing. Again, these were carried on long pieces of bamboo, balanced on the shoulder with pails dangling at the end of each piece. Later this carrying was done by wheelbarrow before the introduction of water pumps and tanks to hold rain water and well water.

Daily access to water holes were monitored on a regular basis and the water sparingly used for cooking, washing, bathing and drinking. The water could be drunk straight from the well, as it was naturally filtered by sand. After the arrival of European missionaries (London Missionary Society), water was normally boiled before drinking.

In contrast, the terrain on nearby Saibai Island is very flat. Saibai is a large mangrove island only four kilometres from Papua New Guinea (PNG). It is surrounded by mud flats and saltwater marshes that are home to a variety of animals—bird life, deer and pig. There were three main water wells on Saibai with two more nearest the village. In the old days, these wells were used for cooking, washing, bathing and drinking. These wells are called Mag, Meth, Kobab, Buthu and Kataw Kobi.

During the Baidham season (dry season), some families would travel from Saibai and PNG coastal villages to Dauan when the water levels were lower. I can even recall large canoes (with sails and two riggers) making the journey to fill up 44 gallon drums with the precious cargo of water, balanced in the middle of the canoe. When dinghies replaced canoes, the families from Saibai and PNG coastal villages continued to make this journey for water supplies. Cut-out empty 20kg flour tins and pails were filled to the brim and carted to the boats or canoe. Entire Dauan families would help by filling the containers and carrying them to the canoes or dinghies—with families passing the pails of water along a line to load them onto the canoes.

When I was young, water was considered to be a precious commodity. Because of the hard work that was put into getting it, we knew we had to conserve every drop and not to waste it. If it ran out, you knew that you would be the one to go outside early in the morning and late in the evening to replenish the water supply for the household.

Today, water is taken for granted, as it flows freely from a running tap. These days Dauan Island has a reticulated water supply (piped). Most of the water used by the community is pumped from a large, lined and covered lagoon on the western side of the island. The lagoon fills in the wet season when the rains are good. But the old wells are still used to supplement the water supply. Saibai now has a reticulated water supply as well. Their water also comes from a large covered storage lagoon.

While nowadays we don't need to exert a lot of energy to access the water or to fix hoses that may have melted (in the sun or by fire), water is still considered precious. The water supply system has to be maintained and the pumps use lots of power to run. We still need to conserve every drop and not waste it.